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ABSTRACT

A study investigated whether the frequency of a legislator's direct contact with constituents was related negatively to the legislator's evaluation of mass media as sources of information on constituent concerns. The study also explored whether the legislators' evaluations of mass media as sources of information on constituent concerns were more positive when legislators had a shorter tenure. Two waves of questionnaires were mailed to the home offices of Alabama's 105 state representatives and 35 state senators. Analysis of the data revealed only limited support for the first hypothesis and even less support for the second hypothesis. While members of the Alabama legislature did not indicate that the news media are a particularly good source for monitoring constituent concerns, these evaluations are not clearly related to the extent of more direct contact with the public. (Tables of findings are included.) (DF)

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Mass Communication and Society Division

COMMUNICATION LINKAGES BETWEEN ELECTED AND ELECTORATE: THE USEFULNESS OF NEWS MEDIA FOR CONSTITUENT CONTACT

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CS 209 763

COMMUNICATION LINKAGES BETWEEN ELECTED AND ELECTORATE:
THE USEFULNESS OF NEWS MEDIA FOR CONSTITUENT CONTACT

Mass communication scholars and others have examined elected officials' information media,[1] the evaluative dimensions underlying their views of those media,[2] their relationships with the press,[3] and their beliefs on the normative role of the press in covering issues and conflicts in society.[4]

The treatment of elected officials varies depending upon one's scholarly focus: in many cases policy makers are treated only as news sources or "adversaries" of journalists, while other treatments examine officeholders as information users and processors.

Within this second approach the press is not treated as adversary or stereotypical "watchdog," nor even as a means for communicating to the public, but as only one information channel in a constellation that includes interpersonal sources (the elected's friends, family, colleagues) and organizational or institutional sources (volunteer or non-profit groups, as well as special interest or lobbying groups) linking public official to public.

The present study adopted this view of officials, and assessed legislators' ratings of different mass media as sources of information about constituents and constituent interests. (The importance of information--mass mediated or otherwise--in the "policy cycle" is self-evident but has, nonetheless, been treated extensively in the literature on policy decision-making.)[5]

Of course, the news media provide an array of information services useful in decision making, from providing news of gov-

ernment and (one's own or others') government agencies, as suggested by Key,[6] Matthews,[7] Dunn,[8] and Nadel,[9] to serving as a linkage of electorate to elected[10] and of public to policy maker,[11] thereby helping officials find out "the systemic agenda of community concerns"[12] on the public's mind. Zukin has described succinctly this media role:

> (I)t is worth remembering that elections are quadrennial or biennial events. Issues...on which decision makers seek guidance, do not allow themselves to be so neatly scheduled. While political parties and pressure groups to some degree serve as opinion-to-policy linkage mechanisms, it is clear that the media also serve this function in contemporary politics.[13]

While there are arguably functional aspects of this linkage (the range of competing views is narrowed to the most prominent few, and consensus amid pluralism more easily achieved, etc.), such indirect contact with constituents may be problematic. For example, in examining the "public relations environment" of Wisconsin senators, Hesse concluded that some seem to "substitute media coverage for personal surveillance of constituents, thereby remaining out of direct touch with opinion in their district." He also suggested a relationship between too great a reliance on the media for constituent contact and brevity of tenure among senators.)[14]

It is this substitution of media coverage--as a "surrogate constituency"--for personal contact that this exploratory study of Alabama legislators sought to examine. Several research questions and two hypotheses were generated.

How useful is media coverage of constituent concerns? Given a presumably preferable alternative to mediated constituent con-

tact--namely extensive direct contact with constituents--how will the legislator evaluate media performance? To answer this question, the following hypothesis was proposed:

> H_1: The frequency of a legislator's direct contact with constituents will be related negatively to the legislator's evaluation of mass media as sources of information on constituent concerns.

Finally, following from Hesse's suggestion of a relationship of direct, personal contact to tenure (and the common-sense corollary that the newest of legislators have not yet gotten to know as many constituents as those with more seniority), the following hypothesis was proposed:

> H_2: The shorter a legislator's tenure, the more positive will be the legislator's evaluation of mass media as sources of information on constituent concerns.

Method

The decision to query Alabama legislators was based on more than logistics. These are "part-time" representatives and senators who, according to one representative, lack any appreciable administrative staffs.[15] The implication? Lacking the additional formal constituency-monitoring capacity of subordinates' "eys and ears," Alabama legislators may be more attuned personally to competing information channels than full-time legislators whose staffs collect, summarize and filter news of public concerns.

During a late-1985 legislative recess, two waves of questionnaires were mailed to the home offices of Alabama's 105 state representatives and 35 state senators,[16] all of whom face reelection in 1986. Eighty-two (or 59%) returned questionnaires.

This sample misrepresented slightly the population of legislators on political affiliation (73% sample Democrats vs. 83% population; 18% sample Republicans vs. 11% population).

Four Likert-type "Media Utility Item measured respondents' evaluation of the news media as sources of several kinds of information on constituent concerns (see Table One). Four other items developed in a previous study of Illinois public officials[17] rated directly the usefulness of the mass media generally and newspapers, television, and radio specifically, in providing "information on what issues are on the mind of your own constituents."

Respondents' "Personal Contact" with constituents was also measured: the estimated number of face-to-face and telephone contacts with constituents in an average week at the capital and at home office, and the number of letters received. "Personal Contact" was operationalized these five ways in order to sample the range of public official-constituent interactions possible. (A "public appearance" at a rally of home-district supporters will likely provide the representative a sense of community concerns different from that discerned by phoning or having a statehouse meeting with community leaders.) Selected demographic data were also collected.

Findings and Discussion

The sample was overwhelmingly Democrat (73% vs. 18% Republican), college-educated (mean and median years of formal education was 17.1), and in its mid-40s (mean age was 45.5 years). Some of this youthfulness reflects a court-ordered redistricting election in November, 1983; of the 24 representatives elected in that

special balloting, 20 were freshmen, while four of eight senators elected were newcomers. The range of total years in public office was from 2 to 29 years, but the average was 6.8 years.

Table One provides central tendency measures on the five "Personal Contact Items." As might be expected, respondents claimed more constituent contacts--both face-to-face and telephone--in the home office than at the capital. In fact, claims went as high as 150 calls and 600 face-to-face contacts while at the home office, and over 220 letters per week.

Recall the "part-time" character of these legislators and the fact that many lack any office or staff at the capital; nonetheless, the maximum claim of contacts at the capital was 100 calls per week and 300 face-to-face contacts (conversely, one claimed no face-to-face contact).

Table One also includes response data on the eight "Media Utility Items" and the items' loadings on two principle components that emerged in exploratory factor analysis of the data. Both unrotated and varimax rotation loadings are provided.

The unrotated primary loadings of seven items on the first component suggests that, for the most part, the "Media Utility Items" are addressing the same concept. But the "dirty" unrotated secondary loadings, and of course the distinctness of the second component after forcing to a varimax rotation, leave the door open for a claim of finding the often-replicated difference in evaluative dimensions underlying print and broadcast media. It seems reasonable to suggest that, for most of these respondents, "the local news media" cited in many items <u>are</u> print media (hence the loading of "newspapers, specifically" with the Likert-

type items).

But while the results of the principle components analysis provide a feel for the dimensionality of the concept of "media usefulness in monitoring constituents," Table One also provides descriptive data characterizing the respondents.

Only a third agree that local media provide the "best information I can get" on constituent concerns (10% "strongly disagree"), a fourth agree such contact is "easier than talking directly with citizens" (but 26% "strongly disagree"), and over half agree that the local news media were good sources of information about community leaders' concerns. Over half saw the news media as "essential" to keeping up with community organizations and agencies (7% "strongly agree").

Four of ten saw the news media in general as "useful" or "very useful" in providing "information on what issues are on the mind of your own constituents," a pattern repeated for newspapers. But broadcast usefulness ratings fell off slightly, with television and radio rated as useful among only a third of the sample.

But do these evaluations of the news media differ, as predicted, on the basis of legislators' personal contact with constituents? Table Two explores this question and the two research hypotheses.

Because of some doubts about the measurement quality of the estimates of personal contacts, respondents were simply classified into two groups for each contact measure: those above and those below the median number of contacts. These groups were then contrasted on the four Likert-type items and the four "use-

fulness" ratings (because of the number of contrasts, findings of statistical significance are considered suggestive).

For space-conserving purposes, Table Two provides responses only on those items showing a significant difference between groups. Readers are reminded to refer back to Table One, therefore, for those items not reproduced in Table Two.

The First Hypothesis: the first hypothesis predicted that a legislator's rating of the press as a source of constituent information would be related negatively to the extent of the legislator's direct constituent contact.

The first hypothesis received only limited support; only two of the measures of "Personal Contact" predicted variance on any of the rating items. Those with the greatest frequency of face-to-face contact in the capital and telephone contacts in the home office were significantly less likely to see the news media as "essential" to monitoring community organizations and agencies. Those with more frequent home-office telephone contact were also significantly less likely to view the news media as a "good" means of monitoring influentials, and were significantly less likely to rate the news media and newspapers as "useful."

But while these five contrasts yielded significant results, most contrasts did not. In fact, there were no significant rating differences for groups differentiated as above-and-below-median in face-to-face contacts in the home office, the kind of "direct contact" which seems most consistent with conventional wisdom!

That is, those legislators who rely most heavily on face-to-face contact to gauge the concerns of their constituents would

presumably be least willing to attribute any major constituent-monitoring role to a traditional adversary, the impersonal mass media.

But no such pattern emerged. Number of home-office face-to-face contacts had no predictive power in terms of the eight media ratings. Based simply on this finding, media ratings are independent of frequency of direct home-office contact. Conversely, the construct validity of the measure may be questionable; this measure of constituent contact (including as it does the aforementioned public appearances, etc.) may be independent of actual, purposive assessment of public concerns.

Instead it was "Personal Contact" operationalized as home-office telephone contacts which best predicted differences on media ratings. Recall that the respondents claimed only half as many home-office phone contacts as face-to-face contacts (See Table One).

To explore further the importance of "Personal Contact" measured in terms of home-office phone calls, the data were recast as two-way tables (not shown) and Chi-square computed, in order to determine any relationship of the various contact measures to years in offices (a practical measure of "success"). Total years in office was significantly related to only one measure of constituent contact: those with above-median years in office were significantly more likely to have above-median home-office telephone contacts (chi-square=4.165 with 1 d.f., $p<0.05$).

While face-to-face contacts may provide a means of tapping constituent concerns, many of those contacts are not designed or planned as fact-gathering forays. They may also contain a great

deal of "noise," in the form of fringe, minority or random unsolicited constituent opinions. A few well-directed, purposive calls can easily tap "key" opinions. Alabama is a predominantly rural state, and access to opinion "leaders and influentials" may be limited to phoning. The accuracy or representativeness of that key sample's or coterie's opinions, of course, is problematic, its long history of influence notwithstanding.

To summarize the testing of the first hypothesis, then: there was inconclusive evidence that ratings of media performance in delivering constituency information were related "across-the-board" to use of direct constituent contact. Legislators' frequency of telephone contact from their home offices, however, did predict differences in media performance ratings.

The Second Hypothesis: the second hypothesis predicted that a legislator with more years in office would rate the media lower as sources of constituent information than would legislators with shorter tenure. (Introduction of the "years in office" variable in the elaboration of the first hypothesis has, of course, presaged testing of the second hypothesis.)

The second hypothesis received even less support than the first. Years in office was significantly related only to agreement with the general statement that, "On balance, the local news media give me the best information I can get" about constituent concerns. Those below the median number of years were more likely to agree with this statement than were their senior colleagues. Years in office failed to predict differences on the other seven rating items.

As an addition to the analysis, Table Two also reveals that

education predicted differences on at least one measure of media performance rating. Those legislators with more formal education were significantly more likely to agree that checking the news media is sometimes "easier than talking directly with citizens."

Conclusions

Members of the Alabama legislature don't give the news media particularly high marks as monitors of constituent concerns. News media information on constituent concerns is seen as neither easier to obtain nor better than other information, although a majority recognize the news media's role in conveying leaders' and influentials' concerns, and see the news media as an "essential" means of keeping tabs on community organizations and agencies. Fewer than half, though, would assign a label of "useful" to any of the news media for covering the public's concerns.

These essentially negative evaluations of the media as purveyors of public opinion, however, are not, with one exception, clearly related to extent of more direct contact with the public. With that one exception, there is not, as hypothesized, a general "either-or" relationship (i.e., a legislator with extensive direct contact with constituents has a less positive evaluation of the news media's usefulness).

That one exception, on the other hand, is worth noting. A legislator's use of the telephone for home-district contacts relates directly to media ratings; the more the contacts, the poorer the evaluation of news media performance. A legislator's "success," in terms of years in office, is also related to greater use of the telephone and to disagreement with the idea that, "on balance," news media are the best source of information

on constituent concerns.

It may be that for logistical reasons, purposive telephone contact with constituents has supplanted traditional face-to-face contacts as the main avenue for constituent contact and opinion-gathering. Regardless, it's clear that in Alabama, preference for or availability of direct face-to-face personal contact has less to do with rating of the mass news media's performance in linking electorate to elected than does the use of another personal information link, the telephone.

Notes

[1] Examples include: Craig H. Grau, "What Publications are Most Frequently quoted in the Congressional Record," Journalism Quarterly (1976) 53:4:716-719; William L. Hungate, "Member Attitudes on News Media Role," in R.O. Blanchard (ed.) Congress and the News Media (New York: Hastings House, 1974) pp. 146-149; Seymour Sudman, "The Presidents and the Polls," Public Opinion Quarterly (1982) 46:3:301-310; Carol Weiss, "What America's Leaders Read," Public Opinion Quarterly (1974) 38:1:1-22; and Ray White, "Government VIPs rate the Washington Press," Washington Journalism Review (January-February 1982), pp. 37-40.

[2] Daniel Riffe, Elijah Akhahenda and Kristen Dollase, "'Local' Public Officials, the News Media, and Other Channels: Is Channel Perception Unidimensional?" Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the International Communication Association, San Francisco, 1984.

[3] See, for example: Blanchard, op. cit., p. 200; W. Phillips Davison, "Diplomatic Reporting: Rules of the Game," Journal of Communication (1975) 25:3:138-146; Carolyn Stewart Dyer and Oguz B. Nayman, "Under the Capitol Dome: Relationships Between Legislators and Reporters," Journalism Quarterly (1977) 54:3:443-453; Walter Gieber and Walter Johnson, "The City Hall Beat: A Study of Reporter and Source Roles," Journalism Quarterly (1961) 38:2:289-297; John Merwin, "How Texas Legislators View News Coverage of Their Work," Journalism Quarterly (1971) 48:2:269-274; and Susan H. Miller, "Congressional Committee Hearings and the Media: Rules of the Game," Journalism Quarterly (1978) 55:4:657-663; and "Re-

porters and Congress: Living in Symbiosis," Journalism Monographs, No. 53 (January 1978).

[4] Approaches vary. Most pertinent is: Robert W. O'Donnell, "What's Wrong with the Media's Coverage of the Legislature," State Legislatures, October 1985, pp. 29-30. See also: Michael E. Abrams and James E. Hawkins, "Legislators' Perceptions of Newspaper Functions," Newspaper Research Journal (1984) 5:4:51-57; Douglass Cater, The Fourth Branch of Government (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959); or Phillip J. Tichenor, George A. Donohue and Clarice N. Olien, Community Conflict and the Press (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1980); and Donohue, Olien and Tichenor, "Local Power, the Press and the World Outside: A Study of Leader and Editor Perceptions," Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Midwest Association for Public Opinion Research, Chicago, 1982.

[5] C. Jones, An Introduction to the Study of Public Policy (North Scituate, MA: Duxbury Press, 1977), pp. 11-12; or R. Erickson, "The Relationship Between Public Opinion and State Policy," American Journal of Political Science (1976) 20:25-36.

[6] V.O. Key, Public Opinion and American Democracy (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961) p. 405.

[7] Donald R. Matthews, "'Covering' the Senate," in Blanchard, op. cit., p. 260.

[8] Delmer Dunn, Public Officials and the Press (Reading, MA: Addison-Westley, 1969); and, "Symbiosis: Congress and the Press," in Blanchard, op. cit., p. 243.

[9] M. Nadel, The Politics of Consumer Protection (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971).

[10] James C. Strouse, The Mass Media, Public Opinion, and Public Policy Analysis: Linkage Explorations (Columbus, OH: Charles E. Merrill, 1975), p. 20; or R. Erickson, N. Luttbeg and K. Tedin, American Public Opinion (New York: John Wiley, 1980), pp. 12-15.

[11] Roger W. Cobb and Charles D. Elder, "Communication and Public Policy," in D. Nimmo and K. Sanders (eds.) Handbook of Political Communication (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1981), pp. 391-416.

[12] Ibid., p. 392; see also, R. Cobb and C. Elder, Participation in American Politics: The Dynamics of Agenda-building (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975).

[13] Cliff Zukin, "Mass Communication and Public Opinion," in D. Nimmo and K. Sanders (eds.) Handbook of Political Communication (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1981), p. 359.

[14] Michael B. Hesse, "A Coorientation Study of Wisconsin State Senators and Their Constituents," Journalism Quarterly (1976) 53:626-633, 660.

[15] The Associated Press, "Full-time Legislature is Foreseen," The Tuscaloosa News, January 3, 1986, p. 8.

[16] Funding for this research was provided by the School of Communication, The University of Alabama.

[17] Riffe, Akhahenda and Dollase, op. cit.

TABLE ONE

Sample Responses to Personal Contact and Media Utility Items

Personal Contact Item	Mean	Mode	Median
When you are in Montgomery for legislative session, approximately how many constituents per average week would you say you communicate with...			
...via the telephone?	24.2	15	17.0
...face to face?	29.2	5	10.2
When you are in your home office, approximately how many constituents per average week would you say you communicate with...			
...via the telephone?	36.6	50	29.5
...face to face?	67.4	100	29.5
Approximately how many letters per average week would you say you receive from your constituents?	23.9	5	14.9

Media Utility Items	Mean[b] (n) Agree %	Prin. Components Loadings:[a] unrotated (varimax) I	II
On balance, the local news media give me the best information I can get about what issues are on the minds of my constituents.	3.1 (81) 38.3	-71 (-80)	41 (-13)
Sometimes, checking the local news media to learn what my constituents are concerned about is easier than talking directly with citizens.	3.6 (82) 24.4	-49 (-57)	31 (-07)
The local news media are a good source of information about the interests and concerns of community leaders and influentials.	2.8 (81) 54.3	-62 (-78)	48 (-02)
The news media are essential to my finding out what community organizations and agencies are doing.	2.7 (81) 55.6	-68 (-74)	33 (-18)

(continued)

TABLE ONE
(Continued)

	Rate As Useful[c] Mean (n) %	Loadings: unrotated (varimax) I	II
To what extent do each of the following provide information on what issues are on the mind of your own constituents?			
the news media in general	3.3 (81) 41.9	87 (59)	13 (65)
newspapers, specifically	3.4 (80) 41.3	81 (59)	06 (56)
television, specifically	3.1 (79) 33.0	67 (11)	63 (91)
radio, specifically	3.1 (81) 32.1	55 (-01)	68 (87)
Eigenvalue:		3.75 (2.84)	1.48 (2.39)
% Variance accounted for:		47 (35.5)	18.5 (29.9)

[a] Decimals omitted in factor loadings. Primary loading underscored.

[b] The higher the mean, the less the agreement with the statement.

[c] The five-point scale here ranged from "Not Useful" to "Very Useful." Percentage reflects those rating source "Useful" or "Very Useful." The higher the mean, the greater the usefulness rating.

TABLE TWO

Media Utility Item Mean Rating,
By Personal Contact Items,
Years in Office,
and Education

	Means[a]	Signif. of Diff.[b]
By Face-to-face Constituent Contact in Montgomery		
The news media are essential to my finding out what community organizations and agencies are doing.		
above median (17) contacts weekly	3.00	
at or below median contacts weekly	2.42	.01
By Telephone Constituent Contacts in Home Office		
The local news media are a good source of information about the interests and concerns of community leaders and influentials.		
above median (27) contacts weekly	3.03	
at or below median contacts weekly	2.56	.05
The news media are essential to my finding out what community organizations and agencies are doing.		
above median (27) contacts weekly	2.95	
at or below median contacts weekly	2.44	.05
Usefulness of news media in providing "information on what issues are on the mind of your own constituents."		
above median (27) contacts weekly	3.08	
at or below median contacts weekly	3.63	.01
Usefulness of newspapers specifically in providing "information on what issues are on the mind of your own constituents."		
above median (27) contacts weekly	3.08	
at or below median contacts weekly	3.61	.05

(Continued)

TABLE TWO
(Continued)

	Means[a]	Signif. of Diff.[b]
By Years in Office		
On balance, the local news media give me the best information I can get about what issues are on minds of my constituents.		
above median (6.6) years in office	3.28	
at or below median years in office	2.84	.05
By Total Years of Formal Education		
Sometimes,checking the local news media to learn what my constituents are concerned about is easier that talking directly with citizens.		
above median (17.1) years education	3.42	
at or below median years education	3.91	.05

[a] Except for "Usefulness" items, the higher the mean, the less the agreement with the statement. For the usefulness items, the higher the mean, the greater the usefulness of the cited source.

[b] Only those items on which there were significant between-group differences (by the Z-test) are shown.